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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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SUBJECT: SAUDI AMBASSADOR TO THE US ON IRAN, SANCTIONS

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL GFOELLER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) A
ND (D)

¶1. (S) Summary: In remarks November 20 to the Charge' d'Affaires, Saudi Ambassador to the US Adel al-Jubeir adopted a very harsh tone on Iran. Al-Jubeir asserted that Iran is behind most of the difficulties facing the US and Saudi Arabia in the region at present. He claimed that recent US-Iranian talks in Baghdad had strengthened the Iranian regime in its belief that the US position in the region is weakening and US influence is in decline. He added that it is unlikely that any economic sanctions imposed in the near term will be enough to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. He called such a development a "catastrophe" for Saudi Arabia. He added that only greatly enhanced cooperation by Russian and China would give sanctions a chance of working, but noted that both the US and the kingdom would have to take ambitious steps to entice Russia and China into supporting much tougher sanctions on Iran. End Summary.

¶2. (S) On November 20, Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the US Adel al-Jubeir invited the Charge d'Affaires and Staff Assistant (note taker) to his Riyadh residence for lunch. The Ambassador told the Charge that now is the time to "confront Iran." He said that Iran has been behind most of the difficulties that both the Kingdom and the US have faced in the region in recent years. Unfortunately, "No one has stood up to them yet." While admitting that the US has begun to counter Iranian efforts at destabilization effectively in Iraq, al-Jubeir suggested that the US has yet to move effectively to counter Iranian interference in the broader region.

¶3. (S) Al-Jubeir claimed that recent US-Iranian talks in Baghdad have only emboldened Iran, since they have sent a signal of US weakness. "Two years ago was the time to talk to Iran," he asserted, "not now." The Saudi ambassador recalled that Iran, ever since the 1979 revolution, has responded to strength and firmness, rather than conciliation. "Khomeini ended the Iran-Iraq when you accidentally shot down a civilian airliner headed to Dubai," he claimed, adding, "the Iranians said to themselves that the Americans

had had enough, and so they stopped."

14. (S) "The position of the King is very clear on Iran," al-Jubeir said. King Abdullah believes that only a show of US strength will stop Iran's expansionist policies and halt its nuclear program, he said, adding that the program is clearly intended to produce nuclear weapons. He noted that the King rejects the argument that military action against Iran will coalesce popular support around President Ahmadinejad. "He believes that the opposite will happen," the Saudi ambassador said.

15. (S) Al-Jubeir added that the Saudis hope that Ahmadinejad's allies will lose the Iranian parliamentary elections in the Spring of 2008. He will then become a "lame duck," he said. "Will this make him easier to deal with or more dangerous?" al-Jubeir asked. "We do not know," he added.

16. (S) He also expressed skepticism regarding the ability of economic sanctions to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. In al-Jubeir's view, Iran could have the capacity to build a bomb in as little as three years, since Tehran already possesses 3000 centrifuges. He noted that the Saudi authorities are afraid that the upcoming change of administrations and the US election cycle will give the Iranians just enough time to complete mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle. Al-Jubeir added that economic sanctions, at least in their current form, would probably not be enough to stop Iran's rapid progress toward a nuclear weapon.

17. (S) That said, he admitted that much tougher sanctions might work. The Saudi ambassador said that the two biggest

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obstacles to stopping Iran's nuclear program through harsher UN sanctions are Russia and China. On Russia, Ambassador al-Jubeir said that, "We need to flatter Putin." He added that, "The Russians want to be treated like the superpower they think they are. From Putin's point of view, he is the leader of the second most powerful country in the world, and yet America lectures him on human rights and elections." He said that gaining Russian cooperation on sanctions against Iran would require putting such concerns aside and focusing on the essential thing, which is stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He also advised adopting a similar attitude toward China, in order to gain its cooperation on Iran.

18. (S) Al-Jubeir noted that Saudi Arabia can do its part by "bribing" Russia and China to support tougher sanctions against Iran. The Kingdom can offer Russia both energy cooperation and business deals, in order to compensate it for any losses it may sustain by downgrading its economic relationship with Iran, he said. "We can do such things, but we cannot offer the Russians acceptance and respect," he said, adding, "only you can do that." He also asserted that "pressuring China" to do such things as revalue the Chinese currency and curtail human rights abuses will not further the cause of sanctions, either. "Strong relations with China," said the Ambassador, "could be the key in stopping Iran from getting a nuclear weapon."

19. (S) Comment: As a senior royal advisor for the last eight years and a close confidant of King Abdullah, al-Jubeir's views usually track those of the Saudi monarch closely. His remarks indicate that Saudi anxieties regarding Iran's nuclear program are growing, and that the Saudi government's confidence in the ability of current economic sanctions to alter Iranian behavior remains limited. That said, he seemed also to believe that much tougher sanctions might work, especially if Russian and Chinese support for them could be acquired, albeit at a high price. End Comment.
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